

Peeling off the Layers on Values: How do they Influence your Education, Employment and Everything

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Abstract

In times of rapid change and busy lives, there may be few opportunities to reflect on who we are as individuals, and how we interact in various communities, networks or groups. However it is vital that we examine issues that are important to us, and which help to shape our responses and contributions in personal and professional contexts. Each of us makes everyday decisions about people and events, based on values developed and refined according to many different influences. By understanding which values are most important to us, and how these might differ or overlap with those of others, we may apply this knowledge for more effective and strategic decision-making. Working in the field of tertiary education it is important for educator's to look at ways of optimising chances of success in learning and teaching encounters. What role do values – particularly teachers' values – play in achieving teaching excellence?

Introduction

This paper explores the values of academic staff who have been recent recipients of University of Southern Queensland (USQ) teaching (research, or supervision) awards, and examines these in relation to contemporary higher education contexts. Qualitative and quantitative information has been obtained from some of the staff at the University to enable greater awareness of the role of tertiary teacher's values and practices and to uncover their significance in a model of best practice.

This study adds to the existing body of research on values by applying contemporary theory to a new cohort of individuals, namely tertiary teachers. Outcomes from the research include an increased understanding of the impact of personal values on how tertiary teachers develop and deliver their courses and what are desirable values in an environment placing increasing demands on individuals to demonstrate 'best practice'.

What are Values?

McGrory (2006) from the Society for Values in Higher Education notes that when 'thinking people' refer to values, 'the often mysterious engines that drive human moral choices' the term is often a synonym for ideals, principles, standards and ethics. McGrory highlights the need for academics to take time out for reflection and a personal 'values audit' as well as considering the values driving decision-making at faculty and institutional levels, taking account of influences such as technological changes, reduced financial resources, reduced government funding, and the need to develop and/or update knowledge and skills. In this study, we ask USQ winners of teaching and scholarship awards to reflect on such issues in relation to their own values, both to understand better their own motivational influences, and to inform those with whom they interact as teachers. Arguably, there may be changes or differences also between motivating influences at the start of their careers and as they progress or are promoted. For instance, researchers at the University of Sydney (2006) found that personal fulfillment was the top priority for school leavers seeking to become teachers, followed by enjoyment in their teaching area, and the pleasure of working with young people and impacting on their lives. Preliminary data gathered in this research project suggest that these aspects are still important for university lecturers in this survey, but might not always be the highest priority or most significant motivator.

The issue of values has engaged many researchers, for example, Rokeach (1973), Schwartz (1992a; 1992b) and his collaborators (e.g., Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987), with numerous refinements of values survey instruments emanating from collaborative work. Space in this paper does not allow scope for a complete analysis. Rokeach refers to 'terminal' values (desirable end-states of existence worth aiming for) values, and 'instrumental' values (means – desirable behaviours to help accomplish those end-states. Further, Rokeach posits a relationship between personality dispositions (such as optimism and pessimism) and values.

Lietz and Matthews (2006) observe that values have cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects, and thus also influence decision-making, preferences and course of action. In their investigation of the influence of students' values on student achievement, they noted differences between Arts students and Sciences students, and differences in the ways in which values affect learning approaches. Arguably, teachers are also students (lifelong learners), but variables such as age and life experience may also need to be considered before extrapolating findings from Lietz and Matthews's undergraduate survey group to a group of experienced university teachers (in this case, winners of teaching excellence awards).

Schwartz's Value Scale

Schwartz and his many collaborators have made a significant contribution to intercultural research, and encouraged greater analysis of values within cultures, as well as between cultures. Schwartz (1992a) developed a definition of values which involves five key areas: (1) Values are concepts or beliefs; (2) Values concern desirable end-states or actions; (3) Values transcend concrete situations; (4) Values direct our choices and appraisals; and (5) Values are ordered by their relative importance. Schwartz (1992a; 1992b), states all values are universal in character and revolve around basic human needs: biological needs, creating social interaction and preserving group coherence and welfare. The Schwartz Value Survey (SVS) was used (with permission from Professor Shalom Schwartz, 2006) in this research. It has two values lists comprising: 30 items in Values List 1 and 27 in Values List 2, respectively. Of the 57 single values in this value theory (Schwartz 1992b; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987), most are divided among 11 separate value types. The order of items is based on extensive pre-testing across 40 countries, and reflects randomisation of items that index the 10 different basic values (Schwartz, personal communication, 26 April 2006).

Schwartz and Bilsky identified the following motivational and related values:

1. Self-direction (creativity, freedom, choosing one's own goals, curiosity, independence)
2. Stimulation (variety, excitement)
3. Hedonism (pleasure, enjoyment of life)
4. Achievement (ambition, success, capability, influence, intelligence)
5. Power (authority, wealth, social power, public image, social recognition)
6. Security (social order, family security, national security, reciprocation of favours, cleanliness, sense of belonging, health)
7. Conformity (obedience, self-discipline, politeness, honoring parents and elders)
8. Tradition (respect for tradition, humility, devoutness, acceptance of one's portion in life, moderation)
9. Benevolence (helpfulness, loyalty, forgiveness, honesty, responsibility, truth, friendship, mature love)
10. Universalism (broadmindedness, social justice, equality, world at peace, unity with nature, wisdom, protection of the environment)
11. Spirituality (spirituality, meaning in life, sense of inner harmony, sense of detachment)

USQ Context

Each higher education provider typically publishes statements covering their mission/vision/and values, which, along with other targeted activities, priorities and projects, establishes the university's profile and prioritises for learning and teaching. Theoretically, these should be exemplified through policies such as those on assessment, learning and teaching, plagiarism, multiculturalism, and others which relate to interactions between the university, staff, students, and the various publics associated with each group.

Expressing Values in the HE Context

One central concern is how much freedom, or encouragement, educators have to express their values? The question arises, can core values really be imposed centrally or will educator's values hinder this process?

The Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), in a 2006 report titled 'Attitudes to Teaching as a Career', notes that people who chose teaching as a career were chiefly motivated by intrinsic rewards: "wanting to 'make a difference', enjoyment of children etc.'. However it was the extrinsic factors such as workload, employment conditions remuneration and status that were most likely to influence decisions to leave the profession (or not to enter it in the first place). The report, citing findings from international research, also suggested that 'too many government initiatives and external demands can be counter-productive, motivating teachers to leave the profession because of heavy administrative workload, over-full curricula and lack of autonomy in their work'. While the focus in the DEST report is on primary and secondary teaching, there are apparent echoes for the tertiary sector also (e.g., Wells, 2006).

Methodology

Participants

The participants comprised USQ winners of Excellence in Teaching and/or Scholarship Awards since 1989 (n = 20). Fourteen were individual winners while 6 had won awards as members of a teaching team. All the five faculties at USQ were represented by winners although the Departments of Psychology and Biology in the Faculty of Sciences were represented by staff members who had not only won teaching awards at USQ but also at national levels (Carrick citations (3) and Awards (2)).

Measures

The study comprised a collective case-study design, including quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Quantitative methods included the administration of Schwartz's value questionnaire (Schwartz, 1992a; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Qualitative methods involved a semi-structured interview recorded on tape recorder with individual participants and a follow-up email survey with the participants who had not responded to the initial Schwartz survey. It is the preliminary qualitative data collected which constitute the primary focus of this paper.

Discussion

Three themes emerged from the preliminary data collected and analysed: tertiary teachers' values; the role of values in informing teaching and scholarship; and non-participation.

Tertiary Teachers' Values

The early qualitative data reveal common threads which encompass an overriding humbleness, connectivity and community. Many participants equated values with personal values, for example one participant defined values as:

...deeply internalized stable beliefs that strongly impact on other beliefs~ attitudes and emotions~ influence behaviour~ and provide an affective or cognitive lens for perceiving the world.

Participants were also specific about what their personal values encompassed:

I would say that some of my personal key values include: (1) a deep respect for, and regard for, individuals – coming from a belief that each person on this earth is of value and worth, and that people are more important than work, profit or personal gain; (2) high regard for authenticity – coming a strong belief that an open, honest, transparent and 'real' self is the key to strong and trusting relationships with others; (4) an avid curiosity for, interest in, and concern for, the lives of others – coming from a place of wanting to connect with others, to care for them, to help people grow, and to be open to the wonderful complexities of life; (5) a high regard for community – coming from a belief that cooperation, contribution and connection are essential to us making a real difference in our world; (6) accountability – coming from a strong belief that I live in relationship with others, and that I am held to account for the impact my life has on others.

There were synergies between those who perceived their values to be personal. One participant nominated "faithfulness/kindness/reliability/honesty/efficiency" whereas another highlighted "trust/honesty/loyalty/help others". "Honesty and integrity" were prioritised by a further participant while another participant defined their values as "making a difference (meaning in life?), respect for self and others, social justice and integrity".

Two participants spoke of values as guiding principles: "broad statements of important guiding parameters in life" and "guiding principles to prioritise activities and to inform interaction with others". Other participants defined values in terms of authentic learning and their roles in influencing their students' teaching behaviours through role-modelling, technology, experiential learning and relevant and flexible learning environments:

If you are asking with respect to teaching and learning then giving students the best possible engaging learning experience that is contextually relevant to their future workplace: modeling effective approaches in pedagogy, using technology appropriately, etc., via using an experiential learning lens.

I have developed and maintained a relevant, flexible, adaptive and participative learning environment that recognizes the needs and aspirants of students....this environment enhances their enjoyment and appreciation of the learning experience and provides opportunities to develop as lifelong learners.

The Role of Values in Informing Teaching and Scholarship

The preliminary data suggest that many of the participants had not reflected explicitly about the links between their values per se and their teaching philosophies and practices. However, their stated teaching philosophies did disclose connections between their values and philosophies. This was particularly evident in teaching philosophies underpinned by spiritual beliefs. For example one participant entitled their teaching philosophy "A Christian Approach to Teaching" and reflected:

Every student who enters my office or classroom is a child of God...Whether Australian or foreigner, friend or stranger, my students have within them a divine spark waiting to be transformed by learning

about the human condition...there can be no doubt that a Christian teacher has a duty of care of the most profound sort.

Another participant also defined their values in terms of religion:

The universe and all creatures in it are subject to a good and holy God...mankind is inherently predisposed to evil...education provides the basis for civilisation and a buffer against anarchy.

A further participant revealed the strong Christian servant leadership beliefs underpinning their teaching philosophy and practices:

These values have led me to take a very others-oriented, inclusive and servant approach to my teaching. I would say I work hard to create an environment in which students know that they are valued and respected, and in which I am also free to be myself with them. It means I incorporate their life experiences and interests – as I am driven by a deep curiosity about their life situations and contexts. My classes tend to be very much community-oriented, as I build in avenues for the students to connect with each other, to work with each other, to teach each other. My scholarship is driven by my commitment to ensuring that I am a good servant-leader – that I am embracing effective teaching approaches, and in how I seek to amplify my service in this educational environment, I also demonstrate effective leadership. My scholarship also focuses on developing a deep understanding of how people learn and grow, and of the diversity of contexts within which my students will specifically be working in as professionals, so that I can mould the learning experience to their specific needs.

Most of the participants prioritised the student and discussed their beliefs about making students feel important. These student-centred values are evident in others' testimonies, though without an explicitly spiritual background. For example:

As young folk say these days, it's all about 'keepin it real'. When you think about what students need to be ready for the teaching profession of the 21st Century, we as responsible educators must ensure that we provide the students with the arsenal they need to work to their full potential in the workplace. So a student-centred, experiential-learning approach is used.

The question of whether values are explicit or implicit in teaching decisions emerged from the data collected. In the semi-structured interview, one participant reflected on the implicit nature of values and how they may not be an explicit or conscious part of the teaching process: 'I have not thought about my values'. However this participant was also adamant about their importance in teaching:

My values make up who I am and what I am helps determine what I teach and how I teach it.

This participant was also inspired by intellectual curiosity:

A desire to learn and a curiosity about the world affects how you look at material you are going to teach as well as who you are going to teach and how you value people and how you value differences in other people.

Many participants revealed the connections between their stated values and their teaching styles. For example, one participant's stated values (self-respect, self-discipline, integrity, wisdom, intelligence, politeness, independence, achievement, responsibility, and freedom) directly influenced the sense of achievement they desired to instil with their teaching style:

I like to set challenges for students, I like them to extend themselves, and I like them to develop a good sense of self-calibration so that they are able to engage in life's challenges with a realistic sense of their own potential. I have a particular abhorrence of spoon-feeding, join-the-dots type teaching, and extravagantly positive feedback.

Non-participation

The small, yet whole-of-population sample size was complicated by the low response rate to the initial survey: $n = 7$ or 35% of the respondents. The project's response rate is in line with national figures. Dey (2007), for example, reports that national data show a continuing decline in the willingness of people to respond to surveys. However, given the small whole-of-population sample we wanted to reflect about the reasons for respondents' non-participation especially in relation to questions about winners being targeted to assume increased responsibility, for example through working parties and committees.

Data collected in replies to a follow-up email to non-responding participants revealed that time and job factors were indeed major contributing factors. Two of the non-respondents explicitly referred to the 'time' factor, in 'lack-of-time' with one participant, a senior academic staff member who had recently assumed extra higher level duties, reflecting:

The answer is that I don't have time. I am wearing three hats and have been for the past 12 months. This time commitment has nothing to do with winning an excellence award, unless you take into consideration that good teachers are usually also good administrators and good researchers and therefore get asked to take on many responsibilities.

A third participant discussed their full-time teaching responsibilities as well as their role (as head of a university research centre), describing consequences in relation to email, for example:

With over 1300 emails in my in tray with about 60-80 relevant emails arriving/day (yes, I do have a Junk folder which has about 20 messages/day) it is more likely that your email got smothered in the sea of other messages.

There were other reasons for the participants' reticence in responding however. One participant, commented that the survey had 'emerged at a really busy time'. This participant also revealed their distaste, in general, for the process of applying for awards:

I think the more important reason though is the idea of being an 'excellent' teacher. I think the process of applying and winning the Carrick Award made me tired of thinking about the processes I use in teaching. Frankly I was sick of talking about how and why I was a 'good' teacher. I get put off by people who tell me how good they are at something, and I think that has a significant bearing of my failure to respond. I didn't want to become like that myself! If it were a completely anonymous process, I may have been more forthcoming.

The data reveal the diversity even within such a small cohort. It highlights the need for further research with larger survey populations, including investigation of further variables such as disciplines-base and genders.

Issues

It is proposed that personal values play a significant role in the acquisition of knowledge, understanding, and application and therefore the values of the educator will impact on the student and the university as well as the wider community. Policy statements and central discourses demand educators conform to a prescribed set of values, often ill defined, and yet we know little about how this is filtered by the educators and how certain values are reinforced to the exclusion of others.

What things do educators value? Is there sufficient common ground for a shared value system to exist? Is a shared value system desirable? Is the fashion for centralised initiatives, encouraging, imposing or preventing the development of a shared value system? Educators' values are not only a personal matter but by the nature of their role a matter for public concern also.

Values also relate to motivation and self-efficacy, and may thus impact on student retention and satisfaction, as well as their overall success as learners, and their work-life balance. These areas require further investigation.

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